

VZCZCXRO1918  
PP RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHPW  
DE RUEHKA #0195/01 0561223  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 251223Z FEB 09  
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8352  
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1984  
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON PRIORITY 2768  
RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000195

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/PB, SCA/FO, AND S/CT; PEACE CORPS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/23/2019  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)  
SUBJECT: BANGLADESH'S BNP: RESTRUCTURING, BUT IN NEED OF A  
UNIFYING STRATEGY

REF: A. DHAKA 162  
[1](#)B. DHAKA 160

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (C) The BNP is at a crossroads: still stinging from its electoral defeat and after boycotting most of the inaugural session of Parliament, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has shown few signs that it understands the need to embrace reform and define its role as the opposition in parliament. Since December, the divisions which contributed to the party's election defeat have become even more apparent, but Party Chairperson Khaleda Zia has yet to clearly choose which group she will support. The Awami League landslide left the BNP and its four party alliance in disarray, and internal disagreements over political strategy since the December polls cast doubt on the future of the alliance. Khaleda Zia's next moves will reveal whether she is willing to reform the party or a simply bide her time and wait to return to the dysfunctional politics of the past. It is in the U.S. interest to see the BNP reform and play a constructive role in opposition.

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PARTY IN DISARRAY  
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[1](#)2. (C) The BNP remains a shambles after its crushing electoral defeat in December. While many party leaders had expected that they would lose the election, all were shocked by their margin of loss. As was apparent during SCA Assistant Secretary Boucher's early February visit (reftel), the BNP Leadership still publicly clings to the explanation that the election was "stolen" from the party as part of a conspiracy hatched by the Caretaker Government and its supporters. However, most outside observers also cite the BNP's ineffective, negative campaign against the Caretaker Government and the party leadership's inability to heal internal fissures, which led to the selection of unelectable candidates. In the voters' minds, memories of the BNP's corruption and abuse of power during the 2001 to 2006 period also loomed large, and crippled the BNP in the run up to the election. After the election, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), the BNP's alliance partner, has shouldered considerable blame for the defeat, given its leadership's association with war crimes committed during the 1971 Liberation War.

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INTERNAL FRACTURES THREATEN UNIFIED OPPOSITION  
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13. (C) The internal fissures within the BNP that contributed to its loss of the December election continue to cripple attempts to formulate a response to the Awami League-led government,s initial policy moves. The government,s move to prosecute alleged war criminals has pushed some members of the BNP to advocate jettisoning the alliance with the JI, a move Zia has thus far resisted. One BNP faction led by the party's Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain, which argued against participating in the December elections, seems intent on taking to the streets to protest Awami League policies. Senior BNP member Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain's faction, which includes those few leaders who actually won seats in Parliament, is campaigning to remove the current Secretary General. Zia appears intent on not alienating either group in order to keep her options open.

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CHOOSING A WAY FORWARD  
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14. (C) While the BNP is currently at a low point, it has the potential to rebound. Despite winning fewer than 40 seats, BNP candidates won over 30 percent of the popular vote, making the party the clear alternative to the Awami League. More forward looking party leaders realize the BNP needs a positive agenda that addresses some of the causes of the December election debacle. There are indications that these leaders have begun initial moves to address these weaknesses. For example, Joint Secretary General Nazrul Islam Khan stressed to us the importance of addressing corruption within the party and attracting younger leaders who will not be unduly influenced by senior party leaders. The BNP began to

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reach out to local districts in January, sending party representatives to reconnect with local leaders. Party leaders will meet in late February to discuss the results of these initial local consultations. The BNP will consider additional reforms at its Council meeting in July.

15. (C) At the same time, other party leaders (including a majority of the Standing Committee) appear to simply want to bide their time and wait for the next elections. Senior BNP lawmaker Salauddin Qader Chowdhury, who has been one of those arguing that the BNP should use its position in Parliament to chip away at the Awami League,s support, hinted at this strategy in a meeting with Poloff where he stated that the BNP,s strategy will be to "hold the government accountable."

Unspoken was the threat that the BNP would accompany this with virulent street protests. Zia has counseled BNP supporters to remain patient, arguing that five years is not a long time to wait. Meanwhile, rumors of the eventual return of Tarique Rahman, Zia's son, continue to circulate among the party faithful. Many among the party faithful hope that Rahman will return soon to revive the party--despite his reputation for corruption and brutality among the general public.

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COMMENT  
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16. (C) Bangladesh needs a viable political opposition if democracy is to flourish here. At present, this opposition can only come from the BNP, which despite its defeat in December still has the support of a significant percentage of the Bangladeshi electorate. The signs that some in the BNP understand the need for party reform are encouraging, but continued obstructionist rhetoric by senior leaders and little meaningful action to execute reform shows how difficult reform will be. Zia's choice of nominees for the upcoming by-elections in Bogra District, a BNP stronghold, will be an important indication of the direction she wishes to set for the party. In the coming months we will seek to identify and encourage those within the party who wish to chart a different direction for the future. It is clearly

not in our interest to see the BNP simply bide its time until  
2013 and await the triumphant return of Tarique Rahman to  
lead the party (and the country) into the future.  
MORIARTY